

Green Sense 09/22/13

Don't be Idling

As the school year reconvenes, it's worth noting a little known law that prohibits vehicle idling near school grounds. Spurred by the American Lung Association, the Massachusetts Legislature in 2009 passed a law to restrict unnecessary idling time near school grounds, in order to improve and protect air quality for our children.

The law has an encompassing definition of school grounds that all motorists should be aware of. The term "school grounds" means:

"in, on or within 100 feet of the real property comprising a public or private accredited preschool, accredited Head Start facility, elementary, vocational or secondary school whether or not in session, and shall include any athletic field or facility and any playground used for school purposes or functions which are owned by a municipality or school district, regardless of proximity to a school building, as well as any parking lot appurtenant to such school, athletic field, facility or playground."

In Reading, that's pretty much the entire Birch Meadow area! You can see Reading's signs asking people not to idle. Also at each school is a posting - required by the law – spelling out the requirements. And, in March of 2010, following up on the new rule, Reading's School Committee created a policy to ban cars from idling near school grounds, including athletic fields and playground facilities.

The rules prohibit the unnecessary idling of the engine of any motor vehicle operated on school grounds, except under a very few conditions related to extremely hot or cold weather, and safety. And there's no time limit, it's simply no idling.

Beyond complying with the law, there are many good reasons not to idle. Idling vehicles pollute the air and present several health and environmental dangers. Gasoline and diesel vehicles produce carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and oxides of nitrogen (NOx).

Carbon monoxide causes respiratory distress and in high concentrations can be lethal; carbon dioxide is a primary contributor to global warming; and VOCs and NOx form ozone - ground-level smog - and impair lung function.

Diesel exhaust is especially dangerous, containing nearly 40 hazardous pollutants. The mixture contains carbon particles that are exceptionally small in size, less than one micron. These fine particles may be inhaled deeply into the lung and carry with them a collection of attached hazardous compounds. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has designated diesel exhaust as a likely carcinogen.

The elderly, those with chronic illnesses, and children are all particularly susceptible to these health effects. Children's lungs are still in development, making them especially vulnerable. Diesel emissions are also associated with increased severity and duration of asthma attacks.

In addition, idling is limited beyond the defined area of "school grounds" by an older law, Massachusetts General Law Chapter 90 Section 16A, and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection idling reduction regulation. This prohibits unnecessary vehicle idling by stating that the engine must be shut down if the vehicle will be stopped for more than five minutes. Exemptions include: 1) the vehicle is being serviced and the idling is required to repair the vehicle; or 2) the vehicle is making deliveries and needs to keep its engine running (to power refrigerators, for example); and, 3) the vehicle's accessory equipment needs to be powered, such as a fork lift or a truck's rear dump bed, or a wheelchair lift in a bus or van.

Beyond all the health implications, eliminating unnecessary idling is a no-cost action motorists can take to help improve air quality. The National Safety Council estimates that idling for more than half a minute burns more gas than it takes to restart the engine. So, you'll also use less fuel when you stop idling unnecessarily.

You can help reduce the health and environmental effects of vehicle exhaust, and comply with the state's idling reduction regulation and law by turning off your engine. You can save fuel and money by turning off your engine when your car is not in traffic.

A column by members of Reading's Climate Committee Gina Snyder